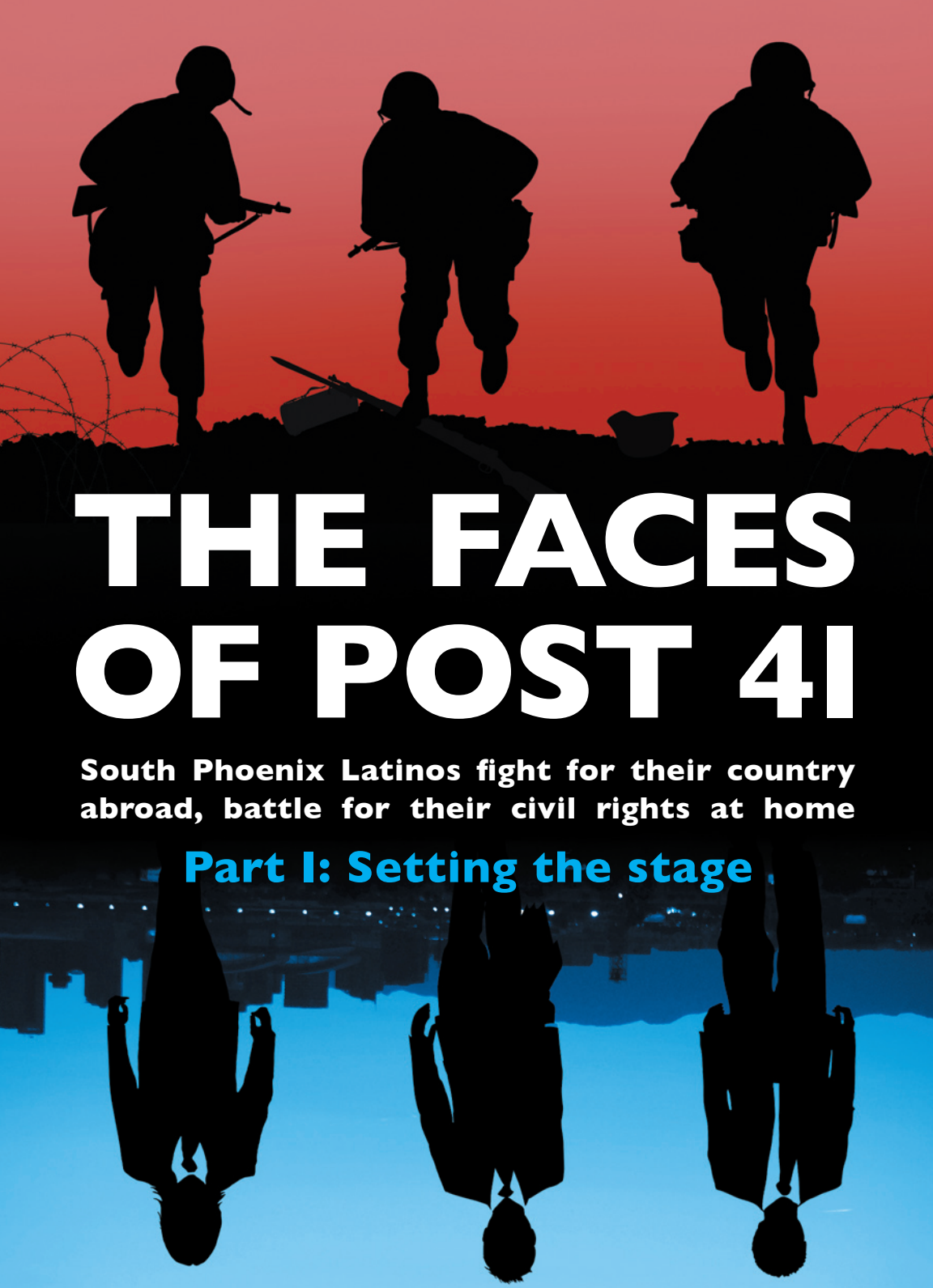

THE FACES OF POST 41

South Phoenix Latinos fight for their country abroad, battle for their civil rights at home

Part I: Setting the stage

By Charles H. Sanderson

The Faces of Post 41: Setting the stage

Anglo arrival

"Any city however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich. These are at war with one another."
– Plato, Greek philosopher

Nothing begins out of a vacuum in society. Events build slowly into the next defining moment. The formation of American Legion Post 41 is no different. Its existence, its purpose and its fight against segregation; these all existed because of the early storyline that formed the U.S. territory of Arizona, and later, the state.

In 1861, a majority of Anglo settlers to reach the region were military men sent to protect mining interests against Apache raiding parties.[1] Mexican families were also migrating north into the central valleys of Arizona from Tucson and northern Sonora throughout the 1850s and 1860s to set up farms and cattle ranches.[2]

Then, almost as soon as it had been obtained by the U.S., the region was left to fend for itself. As the Civil War detonated in April 1861, troops began to pull to the east for battle, under orders from President Abraham Lincoln. Apache Indians increased their attacks on vulnerable new settlements, ranches and mining operations across the upper Sonoran Desert, momentarily spurred in the belief they had caused the military departure.[3]

Arizona was then part of New Mexico, but too isolated to depend on its cities for protection. Requests had been made for several years to split the region into two territories. President Lincoln finally relented in 1863, making Arizona an official territory in hopes of weakening Confederate control in the area. Only the California Column and occupying forces of the Confederate Army would cross the land, often attacked by Indians as well.

A desperate plea was sent to Congress for help. The territory needed $250,000 to enlist volunteers for defense against the Apaches who continued to ravage the countryside. Their funds request was denied. The communities of Arizona were forced to go it alone. This they did.

On Sept. 2, 1865, a volunteer army was formed. Then two chaotic months were spent organizing the new outfit. Approximately 350 men were sworn in to service for one year. Together, they formed five companies of Arizona volunteers. The companies were designated A through F, excluding "D." The Arizona Army National Guard's history began that November in Tubac, when Company E began its first training exercises.

Most of the volunteers were Mexicans, Pima and Maricopa Indians, with 11 mostly Anglo officers. Indian attacks were a common struggle. Northern Sonora and Chihuahua had their own protracted and frustrating history with Apaches. With so many Mexicans in the ranks it is no surprise that as they prepared to fight off the Apaches, their motto became a Spanish word, "Cuidado!" (Be Careful!).

Settling together

In 1866, the regular troops would return to Arizona.

A former Union soldier, John Y.T. Smith, would secure a contract with the newly-constructed Fort McDowell, supplying hay to feed the horses. It wasn't hard to find workers to harvest the grass growing along the banks of the Salt River. Mexican settlers forced north were looking for extra work to supplement their incomes; their land in Mexico had begun to fall into the possesion of land barons such as Colonel Luis Terrazas.

Many had been farming along the upper Gila River, but overgrazing and deforestation caused flash floods that decimated their crops.[4] They soon found that working with Smith was safer than other options, such as tedious labor in the mines that dotted the countryside. Living and working near Fort McDowell also provided some safety from the Apache raiding parties.

Fledgling settlements began taking shape along the banks of the Salt River. With time – and blessed with no Indian raids – Phoenix and Tempe took root. Though it was easy to see numerous 14th century Hohokam ruins dotting the landscape, Jack Swilling, a former Confederate soldier, was the first to realize ancient canals had been carved across the large Valley floor.

Below, men dig the canals that will soon turn the Salt River Valley into an farming powerhouse.

PHOTO COURTESY SALT RIVER PROJECT

PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Maricopa & Phoenix Railroad train rolls into the new station at Phoenix, 24 miles from its departure in Maricopa Wells.

In 1868 he secured the funding to form an irrigation company, enlisting Mexican labor to clear the canals and add irrigation ditches. Swilling and his Mexican wife Trinidad Escalante joined the new settlement.

As opportunities grew, more Mexicans, Indians and Anglos would converge on the untapped Valley.

Everyone pitched in to establish a community. In the remote isolation, their struggle to survive left no time for elitism, racism or segregation. Such views were largely kept in check as the town scraped an early existence out of the hard Sonoran Desert. Town Marshall Henry Garfias, a Mexican American from California, kept order in Phoenix. Supplies (and word of the outside world) arrived from Wickenburg to the north, or were shipped from Port Guaymas, Mexico, to the town of Maricopa Wells, 35 thorny miles to the south – a full day's ride by horse and wagon.

After irrigation ditches were dug in Phoenix, and as the desert began giving up its agricultural gift, a thin steel scar was being etched across the pristine Arizona landscape. Marching east from Yuma, the Southern Pacific Railroad had begun to lay its tracks in 1879. By May, it would reach Maricopa Wells.

Soon after, enterprising men such as Darrel Duppa set up teamster wagons to ferry travelers across the sea of cactus. When the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 took away one labor force, a new one was hired. Mexican laborers filled the void of Chinese workers, helping to add new rail lines throughout the Southwest. Nine years after the railroad came to Arizona, 87 Mexican workers began grading a roadbed for a new line of track between Maricopa Wells and Phoenix, slowly closing the gap between the Valley and the outside world. As summer months blistered the countryside, work halted and the Mexican labor force drifted into Phoenix, seeking light work until

the heat passed. Such was the migratory life of Mexican labor in the early days of Arizona. They followed the work.

When the first iron horse steamed into Phoenix at dawn on July 4th, 1887, as part of the Maricopa & Phoenix Railroad, it brought more than what could be imagined. Now that travel was easier, the last American frontiers were about to fill up, displace cultures and change the U.S. forever. The world's largest land-grab, under the premise of Manifest Destiny, was coming to an end.

With the trains came people and supplies from the Eastern U.S. and from California. Port Guaymas was no longer a main supply line. The Mexican thread of culture began to weaken as the Anglo communities in Phoenix enjoyed new luxuries and found free time to express ideas that had been set aside. The tenuous multicultural existence faded, and so began the scourge of segregation and prejudiced ideals.

The tracks were an unsightly mark on the land, noisy with the coming and going of trains, people and supplies. The area was seen as undesirable to arriving Anglos, and land values south of town faltered. Slowly, laws and city ordinances began to appear, segregating communities both blatantly and with subtlety. Land barons such as Michael Wormser arrived on the scene to snatch up property where they could. Poor and displaced families began to collect into areas they could afford, mainly around the train tracks south of town.

By 1885, the Mexican and Mexican American population within Phoenix had dropped to a quarter of the total population as more Anglos arrived and the Mexican population moved into rural farmland across the Valley. Land was sold cheap by farmers hoping to tie down the inexpensive, but migratory Mexican labor force.

Then a defining moment set the future in motion.

A flood of change

On Feb. 19, 1891, winter storms raged across Arizona, bringing change. The problems began at 1 a.m., announced by telegraph. An engineer was sending word from the Arizona Dam, 25 miles up the Salt River. Water had begun to spill over the dam and was rising fast. Phoenix's Marshall "Billy" Blankenship was awaken from his sleep to gather men and warn anyone living closest to the river. As families fled to high ground with what little they could carry, the floodwaters rose, eating away at the banks of the river.

As predawn approached, the crowds tried to ignore the dissolving walls of adobe homes being sucked down into the torrent. They talked over the occasional crash of metal. Crowds milled about in the brisk air and moonlight, joking nervously as sickening sounds of wreckage drifted over the rush of water. When the sun finally crept up past the horizon, the flood came into full view. Several homes were gone – others clung perilously to islands that had resisted erosion. The railroad bridge had fallen at about 5 a.m. along with a mile of track ripped loose in the collapse. The telegraph

line and poles were washed away as well, severing contact with the outside world. All that remained was "one iron span that still clung quivering and unsteadily to the south bank of Salt River."[5]

It would be almost a week before the floods finally receded, leaving roads two miles north – as far as Washington Street – awash in mud and silt. Few lives were lost, but on the waterlogged banks of the Salt River, the story of South Phoenix had begun.

Those who could afford new homes moved to higher ground and began the northward expansion of Phoenix that continues today. Those who could not were forced to live in the decimated communities nearest the Salt River. The Mexican barrios began to take shape. They were also populated by Chinese, Blacks, prostitutes – anyone forced to live at risk in the now-affordable floodplain.

With no building codes to govern construction, homes were built out of adobe bricks and spare wood. The roofs were thatched. Most had dirt floors that led out to dirt yards and dirt streets. There was no water or sewer system, save the occasional outhouse. Many of these communities would remain largely unchanged for the next 60 years, most outside Phoenix city limits until 1959. It would take years to pour concrete floors for their homes, and until the 1960s for activists to convince city officials to finally bring street lights, pavement and sidewalks.

As the 20th century approached, businesses began to build factories on the now-affordable land. But as time passed the land became polluted and people began to see clear dividing lines. A grey area formed between Van Buren and the railroad tracks built only a few years before.

Latinos were not welcome north of Van Buren, and it was seldom to see any well-to-do Anglo venture farther south than the train tracks. Though decades in the making, this was the world into which Ray Martinez and Frank "Pipa" Fuentes were born.

PHOTO COURTESY SALT RIVER PROJECT

The flood of 1891, looking toward "A" Mountain, from the north side of the Salt River in Tempe.

The dividing line

"Washington was a dividing line. We could go up and down Washington Street and we ... couldn't go into the theatre, except in the balcony ... there were three theatres we could, and the others we couldn't. But we could go in and buy ice cream.

"But north, like say Adams or Van Buren, noooo. That was off limits. That was no-man's land for us. You didn't dare. You could go up there. But not to try to buy anything." – Ray Martinez, co-founder of Post 41[6]

In 1891, after the Salt River returned to normal, the land around its banks became the last place any investor wanted to spend money, even though real estate was a major source of the economy at the time. Few real estate promoters cared to undertake any residential development in flood-prone areas.[7]

Indeed, to confirm this distaste, two more floods would inundate the area in 1906 and 1908 before the Roosevelt Dam was built in 1911 and the river finally choked off.

Land was sold cheap for the construction of factories, flour mills, warehouses and stockyards. The desirability of land in the area dropped further. Another industry that flourished in South Phoenix was agriculture. Many Mexican farmers had worked the area but, in a twist of irony, the 1891 flood was followed by a decade of drought. Water soon became a rare commodity. Banks and land barons took control of the precious irrigation water. Then Anglo farmers and ranchers such as Dwight Heard took over the acreages and hired the land-stripped Mexican farmers to work their own land and livestock for cheap wages. Anglos had begun to rule daily life in the Valley.

Real estate salesmen were frustrated by Heard as he undercut their profits in the farmland south of town. To retaliate, they would launch a slander campaign that further solidified the bad reputation of the area.

Meanwhile, frustration began to boil over in Mexico among rural communities that had felt abused by their government and by land barons that had slowly pushed Mexicans north. The frustration sparked The Mexican Revolution, which drove even more Mexican nationals north. Between 1911 and 1920 more than 890,000 Mexican citizens legally entered the U.S. seeking safety.

PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Migrant laborers at a temporary cotton camp in 1930s Tolleson.

The unofficial number must have been higher as Mexican nationals flooded the Southwestern U.S., fleeing the bullets flying on their own soil. Various Mexican revolutionary actions such as the "Plan de San Diego" sparked absurd fears among Anglos that they would be next. Rumors of an intercepted plot to take over Phoenix in 1914 only added to Anglo distrust of the Mexican population.[8]

Despite these fears, Anglo farmers still needed Mexican labor to work their fields. With the start of President

Theodore Roosevelt's Federal Reclamation Act in 1902 and the formation of the Salt River Project in 1903, the Salt River Valley's agricultural industry was exploding. Cotton would soon bring even more Mexican laborers north in search of work. By 1912, as mining activity slowed in Arizona, the irrigated fields of central Arizona took over the economy, fed by the new reservoir at Roosevelt Dam. Cotton farms quilted the desert landscape as the Salt River Valley began to surpass Cotton Belt plantations in the Southeastern U.S. In 1914, the Salt River Valley boasted the world's best Egyptian cotton.

With 186,000 acres of cotton in the Salt River Valley alone, Arizona had undeniably become one of the largest cotton producers in the U.S.

During World War I, as Anglo workers turned to the war effort, farms found a need for more hands. To supply labor, farmers pushed to bring still more Mexican hands north. When the war ended, the Mexican and Mexican American population continued to grow through the 1920s.

PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This adobe structure was built by Darrell Duppa in 1870. Here it is shown in the 1940s. The building still stands today on the property of American Legion Post 41. It is considered the second oldest house in Phoenix after the Walker Jones/Alcaria Montoya house.

With the success of agriculture, Hispanic barrios began to sprout next to farmland as migrant laborers bought land sold by farmers and real estate agents to keep them stationary. Golden Gate Barrio was rumored to be named for the front gate of the farmhouse as it caught the sun's rays. Cuatro Milpas (four cornfields) may have been named not for the crop, but for the classic Mexican folk song.

La Sonorita was a common barrio name across the Southwest. El Mesquital, El Campito, Green Acres and numerous others formed south of the city center. In isolation, these impoverished communities became largely self-sufficient. They built parks such as Grant Park. Enterprising Chinese businessmen opened stores, and Mexican Americans opened numerous businesses to provide for their isolated farm-working communities.

As the cotton industry exploded in the Valley, growers began importing labor to work the immense fields. Hiring agents, earning $4 a head, were sent to Mexico by the Arizona Growers Association(ACGA) to find willing labor. These *enganchadores* painted grandiose images of a good life to be found in the U.S. When combined with their experiences of the revolution ravaging their homeland, Mexicans could not refuse temptation. Between 1918 and 1921, almost 30,000 underpaid Mexican farm workers flooded into the Valley to work the growing fields and look for their salvation. What they found were dusty labor camps, low wages and severe neglect.[10]

The exploitation only worsened. There were reports of Mexican chain gangs and illegal deportation. Labor contractors were accused of bullying and abusing the workers.[11] An investigation in 1920 found that the workers were being housed in tents and overcrowded shacks with no electricity, laundry facilities, showers or water. And sometimes not even outhouses.[12]

Then in early 1921, six years after cotton had became king of industry in

the Valley, the king was toppled. Boll weevils decimated cotton crops across the Southern U.S. and the market collapsed. As Arizona cotton companies went bankrupt, the crop's dominance of Arizona agriculture created a disastrous side effect. When the weakened cotton harvest was done, 10,000 underfed and penniless Mexican laborers sat idle – with no other crop to harvest and no way to return home. The Mexican settlements filled to capacity and humanity began spilling over into shanty towns.[13] In the rush to import cheap Mexican labor, a social crisis had been created.

Under community pressure, the ACGA made feeble attempts to ship workers home. And though the Mexican consul in Phoenix (González Córdoba) did convince his government to send $17,000 to help the stranded population, they were largely left to fend for themselves.[14] The Mexican barrios overflowed. Their inhabitants sought any job they could find.

In time, other crops balanced the agricultural industry in Arizona, and the workers provided the labor. But by now, the barrios south of town had grown much larger, yet lost any productive connection with Phoenix proper. A dividing line between the two worlds seemed to have been etched in the minds of every Anglo citizen.

The barrios of South Phoenix were separate. In these poor tenements, Mexicans felt an inclusion, a welcome that they did not receive outside their neighborhoods. If Mexican Americans were tolerated at all in Anglo communities and businesses, it was with restrictions; such as "Mexican Day" at local swimming pools or "Mexican Night" at the Riverside Ballroom.[15]

Serving as safe havens from discrimination and segregation, the barrios grew, helped by cheap land and housing, nonexistent or weak building codes, shared language, customs, ties to family and friends, and the need for an identity with the homeland and a bridge to American society.[16]

Precursors to a movement

On a stroll, heading north from the barrios, one could watch the gradual change, approaching Washington Street. The occasional Anglo walked by as a lively downtown came into view. Continuing further on to Van Buren, "No Mexicans allowed" signs began appearing in shop windows. Still farther north, the Anglo animosity to Blacks and Mexicans was palpable on the street.

Minorities in Phoenix had nowhere to run. Unwelcome in the city proper, they also suffered deeply as the Great Depression hit. By 1933, 20 percent of Phoenix's population was unemployed, and some minorities found meager pay in labor and agriculture. There were few other options available.

There were also few organizations existing to help Latinos during this time. Even the police were of little help.

Ray Martinez would later recall the usual practices of Phoenix police:

"As an example, you know, police would stop you on the street for no reason at all. They all carried a nightstick. And they said, 'Well you just get

on here, because we're having a situation here. We don't want you here. And so you better go,' and sometimes they'd give you a good whack with the nightstick and you'd go along.

"Many of the fellows were picked up. 'Cause in those days, they could pick us up, say 'investigation.' They had this thing. In other words, they could hold you about three days. In-*ves*-tigation.

"And then they could always justify it somehow or another. But one of the favorite things to do was get you in the elevator, then go up, stop the elevator between floors and beat the hell out of you – just for the hell of it."[17]

One organization that did exist was the Friendly House. But it had its issues.[18] It was started with the goal of helping teach English, find domestic work and improve the personal hygiene of immigrants. The organization also "lauded employers' efforts to deport immigrant troublemakers who sought to organize strikes. This appealed to the general population who wanted to Americanize the immigrants as a way of ensuring they conformed to Anglo-American cultural and class norms."[19]

Ray Martinez remembers his wife's story of employment through the Friendly House:

> *"My wife – just out of grammar school – went to the Friendly House, you know to hire out. ... She was sent to a lawyer and his wife. They were just moving into an apartment. Well, they told her it'd be about a week's work. And she'd be paid 10 dollars.*
>
> *"Well ... Seven days she worked. And I mean 8 to 10 hours a day. And, then of course, in those days, too, they hired young Hispanic girls ... Why? An effort was made, you know – sexual harassment. And they had to suffer those indignities too, you know – when the wife wasn't home.*
>
> *" ... So, at the end ... my wife said when she was through, she asked the lady, 'I'm through. You don't need me so ..."And the wife called out to the husband, said, 'Honey, give me the 10 dollars so I can pay.'*
>
> *"I already paid her."*[20]

But Friendly House, Mexicans and Mexican Americans all faced a bigger problem.

As the U.S. Depression-era economy struggled, Americanization gave way to the idea of repatriation. Barely 10 years had passed since Mexico's revolution sparked an enormous exodus of refugees to the U.S. In the decade following Mexican President Venustiano Carranza's death in 1920, Mexico would struggle through the Cristero Rebellion and numerous attempts to overtake its unstable government.

As the 1930s began, Mexican officials were still flush with the ideas their revolution had promised. But the country was depleted of its population. To bring citizens home, they promised cheap land, cooperative farming communities and other benefits if citizens would return. But as half a million Mexican nationals crossed the border, the government in Mexico City found itself ill-prepared to keep its promises, leaving its citizens stranded at the international border waiting to return for better economic times in the U.S.[21]

Early Latino organizations in Phoenix

Alianza Hispano-Americano
Founded in Tucson, 1894
Joined forces in 1920 with Phoenix Americanization Committee to form Friendly House.

La Liga Protectora
Founded in Phoenix, 1915 - 1930s
Pedro Garcia de la Lama formed La Liga to fight a proposed law that limited the number of Mexican Americans a company could hire.

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
Founded in Corpus Christi, Texas
1929 - present
The oldest existing Hispanic civil rights organization in U.S.

The Latino American Club
Founded in Phoenix, AZ
1933 - 1950s
Its goal was to educatate Mexican Americans in politics and find work during the Great Depression.

La Sociedad Mutualista Porfirio Diaz
Founded 1907 - 1950s Provided insurance to Latinos who could not get it otherwise.

The U.S. had begun a repatriation program as early as 1928. In 1929, President Herbert Hoover opened the floodgates by authorizing the Mexican repatriation program. By the end of 1931, roads in Texas were choked with Mexicans and Mexican Americans going to Mexico. Trains in California were loaded with Latinos, regardless of their legality in the U.S. Locally, Placida Garcia Smith – the new director of Friendly House – attempted to help families repatriate from the Valley. She, too, had been blinded by the empty promises of Mexican consulates in Phoenix. The Great Depression wore on.

During this tragic program, more than a half million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were sent back to Mexico. In 1933, Garcia Smith would report having helped 130 families to the border since the previous spring. The following year, with the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his promised New Deal, repatriation began to slowly fade as new solutions to the Great Depression were sought.[22]

One future Post 41 member, Valdemar Córdova, would watch as his father, Luis, became frustrated with the unconstitutional madness of the repatriation. In 1932, Luis founded the Latino American Club, another organization to help Latinos during the 1930s that would be more political than Friendly House – and possibly form some of the roots of Post 41's political activism years later.

Luis Hernandez Córdova was a boilermaker for the Southern Pacific

Placida Garcia Smith

Placida Garcia Smith was born in 1896 in the town her Mexican grandfather founded, Conejos, Colo. Her father was the town sheriff and the men he dragged into his jail cells invoked empathy in Placida for society's problems.

After graduating high school in 1915, she attended universities in Colorado, California, Utah and Mexico.

In 1929 she came to Phoenix when her husband, Reginal, landed a job at the Arizona Republic.

Placida became director of Friendly House in May 1931.

Seven years later her husband died.

The young widow poured her heart into Friendly House, teaching English classes and helping people of all nationalities gain their citizenship.

In the 1940s, gentle, soft-spoken Placida spoke out on slum clearance and joined numerous committees and boards.

In 1949, she would asist Adam Diaz in bringing an exhibition baseball game to Phoenix between the New York Giants and Mexican All-Stars of Sonora. Extra activities were run by Ray Martinez of Post 41.

In 1950 she was sent as an official U.S. Representative at the inauguration of Mexican President Miguel Aleman.

By 1960, she had received honors from the Daughters of the American Revolution and from Las Damas del Valle.

In September 1960, Placida's beloved Friendly House moved into a larger building. Post 41 offered a portion of its property to be used for parking.

In 1961, she was named Phoenix Woman of the Year in a ceremony at the Westward Ho.

When she stepped down as director in 1963, she had helped more than 1,000 people gain their citizenship. She continued teaching until 1970.

Placida passed away in July 1981.

Railroad and long known as a leader of the Mexican American community. Though his Latino American Club's focus was political, it was also a safe haven for Latinos as jobs became scarce and the tragedy of Mexican repatriation began.

Throughout the decade, several chapters of the Latino American Club would form across Arizona. They convened in Phoenix with hopes of increasing Latino involvement in the political system. They often endorsed candidates appealing to Mexican Americans, such as Tucsonan Conrad James Carreón, a slender man who gave explosive speeches and would represent Phoenix as the first Spanish-speaking representative in the Arizona State Legislature in 1938. His political career would span 25 years.

Politicians were invited to meet with the club and discuss the community's needs, and the club sought to increase voting power by organizing drives and rallies across southern Arizona.[23]

"The most serious threat to our unity and way of life is the greatest of all enemies within, INTOLERANCE, whose most ugly phase is racial and religious bigotry. ... I shall use the full power of my office to smite the ugly head of intolerance whenever and wherever it may appear."

– Conrad James "Jimmie" Carreon in a statement that he would run for Congress in 1942

Such political activism would inspire a future generation to become involved. As a young man, Phoenix's first Hispanic city council member – Adam Diaz – found himself involved in these drives, going "house to house, door to door (to) explain to people" what they were trying to do.[24]

Unfortunately, the Latino American Club was not immune to weaknesses. In 1935, the club asked the Phoenix City Commission to exclude Blacks from using Southside Park on 2nd Avenue and Grant Street, in a largely Mexican community.[25]

To further complicate life, the Latino American Club would be one of many organizations that could not meet the challenges of hard survival in the Great Depression. Nor, for all its successes, was the club able to change the second-class status of Latinos' lives in Arizona.

Luis' son, Valdemar, would later recall the continued exclusion of Latinos:

> *"Here in Phoenix, up to World War II, we could not live where we wanted to. In some areas they would not rent or sell to a Mexican American. At the Fox Theatre, you had to sit upstairs. At the Studio Theatre in downtown Phoenix, you couldn't even get in. At the public parks, such as University Park – which was founded and maintained with city tax dollars which we all paid – a Mexican American was not permitted."*[26]

As Roosevelt's New Deal took hold, and his "Good Neighbor Policy" with Latin American countries helped improve difficult relations, Mexican Americans still found life hard in the U.S. But there was one organization offering an escape. It could provide jobs, a place to sleep and food to eat: the military.

A history in battle

"This is a fight between a free world and a slave world."
– Vice President Henry A. Wallace, May 8, 1942

On Jan. 3, 1939, just before World War II ignited, David Perez walked into the Arizona Army National Guard office to enlist. At 17, he was still a gangly high school student who was leaving behind his job at a local aluminum company to step into a U.S. Army uniform.

In a 2003 interview, he recalled with a light-hearted laugh, what had brought him there. "In 1938 ... I went to enlist in the daytime. They say 'well right now we don't have openings for Mexicans. But there's gonna be two openings January the 1st of 1939. So on January 3rd – it was drill night – I went and sure enough there was a vacancy. So that's when I joined."[27]

Perez's enlistment was anything but new. A long thread of Latinos in U.S. military history can be traced to the American Revolution when Louisiana Territorial Governor Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid with his 1,400 Spanish troops battled the British across the coastal waters of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. His efforts would aid the American Colonies in their battle for independence.

When the Civil War began in 1861, more than 3,000 Mexican Americans enlisted on both sides. By war's end, that number had grown to 10,000. In 1864, Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut and his fleet pushed into Mobile Bay upon his famous command, "Damn the torpedoes." The crew successfully captured the Confederate Navy's CSS Tennessee, and Farragut became the U.S. Navy's first full admiral.

David Glasgow Farragut

At the turn of the 20th century, Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" would fight on Cuban soil in the Spanish-American War. Captain Maximiliano Luna of New Mexico would serve with distinction, and George Armijo would go on to serve as a U.S. Congressman. Many Hispanic members of the Arizona National Guard would also join Roosevelt's volunteer cavalry regiment.

Two years later, during the Boxer Rebellion in China, Pvt. France Silva of the U.S. Marines became the first Mexican American to earn a Medal of Honor for attempting to defend the Tartar Walls that surrounded Beijing and rebuild a barricade. Several men had already been killed in the battle. Yet, when a bullet ripped through Silva's elbow and ricocheted off his chest leaving a vicious wound, he refused to step back to safety. Despite only being able to hold a small pistol, he continued to relieve guards through the next day. The following year he was awarded the medal while stationed on Mare Island.

In 1916, the Latino military legacy grew as the largely Mexican American 1st Arizona Infantry followed Col. A.M. Tuthill and Gen. John J. Pershing into Mexico in a year-long pursuit of Pancho Villa, who had raided Columbus, N.M., and killed 17 Americans. Two months after the troops withdrew from Mexico they were mobilized for World War I on April 6, 1917.

Across the nation, some 200,000 Latinos would be enlisted to fight in World War I. Most were Mexican American, with 18,000 Puerto Ricans joining their ranks. In Arizona, more than 12,000 men would be drafted or enlisted, such as Frank Valenzuela, whose family had homesteaded in Arizona since 1877.

Marcelino Serna, circa 1920s

Latinos still felt the heat of discrimination in the military. They were often drafted as "buck privates" – soldiers at the lowest grade of the lowest rank – not even receiving a stripe on their shoulder. Soldiers who could not speak English well were sent to language training centers and integrated into the mainstream army, often given menial tasks.

David Barkley Cantú was one of just two Mexican Americans who gained recognition for their service in World War I. Cantú received the Medal of Honor posthumously, having died in the Meuse River after completing an essential scouting mission in November 1918. It wasn't discovered until years later that indeed he was Latino. He had used his Anglo father's surname, Barkley, to avoid being segregated out of the front lines.[28]

The other soldier, Marcelino Serna, received the Distinguished Service Cross and the French Croix de Guerre for his Herculean feat in Meuse-Argonne, France, on Sept. 12, 1918.

Serna had come to the U.S. two years earlier in search of work on the railroads and in the sugarbeet fields of Colorado. Now he was a sharpshooting private with B Company of the 355th infantry, 89th Division.

Trailing the sniper he had wounded, he came across a German bunker, killed 26, and facilitated the capture of another 24 Germans. And this was after a similar feat at St. Mihiel where he killed six and captured eight Germans.

He related the experience to an *El Paso Times* reporter in 1962.

"I jumped up and ran about ten yards and then hit the dirt. I kept this up until I was in the machine gunner's left flank. He had hit my helmet twice with bullets during this run.

"When I got close enough, I threw four grenades into the nest. Eight Germans came out with their hands up. Another six were in the nest dead. I held my prisoners until help arrived."

Six days before the Armistice, Serna's unscratched luck ended. He was shot in the leg by a sniper, and hobbled back to safety.

On June 19, 1919, Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, and World War I came to an end. That same year, U.S. relations with Japan were growing shaky, and the beginnings of War Plan Orange were formed in preparation for the possibility of a conflict with the ambitious island nation. Some feared it was just a matter of time before the two nations clashed.

In September 1919, a young Adolf Hitler was sent to investigate the German Workers Party – a suspicious group meeting with Marxist ideals of which Germany disapproved. Instead, Hitler became interested in the movement, starting a political trajectory that would change the world. The stage was being set for World War II, a global conflict that would see 16.1 million U.S. military personnel deployed in the Allied fight.

This was the history into which young David Perez and the founding members of Post 41 would step.

Resources

1. *Minorities in Phoenix*, by Bradford Luckingham
2. *Corridors of Migration*, by Rodolfo Acuña, pg. 48
3. *Abraham Lincoln and the Western Territories*, by Ralph Y. McGinnis, pg. 86
4. *Corridors of Migration,* by Rodolfo Acuña, pg. 48
5. *Arizona Republican*, Feb. 19, 1891
6. *Los Veteranos* documentary, by Pete R. Dimas
7. *Minorities in Phoenix*, by Bradford Luckingham, pg. 25
8. *Arizona Republican* Aug. 8, 1914, pg. 1; Aug. 9, 1914; Aug. 10, 1914
9. *Arizona Republican* Sept. 15, 1914
10. *An Awakened Minority*, 2nd edition, by Manuel Servín, pg. 116
11. *Corridors of Migration*, by Rodolfo Acuña, pgs. 218-9
12. *Arizona: A History,* by Thomas E. Sheridan, pg. 214
13. *Journal of Arizona History.* pg. 14, Spring-winter 1973 "Minority group Poverty in Phx" by Shirley J. Roberts, pg. 353
14. *Arizona: A History,* by Thomas E. Sheridan, pg. 217
15. *Minorities in Phoenix,* by Bradford Luckingham pg. 40
16. *Minorities in Phoenix,* by Bradford Luckingham
17. *Los Veteranos* documentary, by Pete R. Dimas
18. *Minorities in Phoenix,* by Bradford Luckingham, pgs. 35-40
19. *Los Tucsonenses*, by Sheridan, 102-12, 166-79; Carlos C. Jácome, clippings files, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson; Meeks, "*Border Citizens*," 102-16, 267-69, supported by many Mexican-Americans.
20. *Los Veteranos* documentary, by Pete R. Dimas
21. *The U.S. Mexican border in the 20th century* by David E. Lorey. Pg 72
22. Letter from director of Friendly House, Placida Garcia Smith to Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, July 11, 1933, Hugh C. Gilbert Papers, 1914-1933, MS 1097, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson; "Placida Garcia Smith," 80-81, Arizona Women's Collection, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, University Libraries, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona.
23. *Minorities in Phoenix*, by Bradford Luckingham
24. *Border Citizens: the Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Phoenix* by Eric V. Meeks.
25. *Minorities in Phoenix*, by Bradford Luckingham
26. *Minorities in Phoenix*, by Bradford Luckingham
27. *Los Veteranos* documentary, by Pete R. Dimas
28. *Saving Private Aztlan: Preserving the History of Latino Service in Wartime. Diálogo Magazine*, by D. López. July 14, 2006